

FEEDBACK & ITS RELEVANCE IN COMMUNICATION

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ABSTRACT

The Shannon-Weaver's Model of Communication fences communication out to the transmission of message from sender to the receiver. It is a linear process with subsequent to's and fro's. It also talks about various external factors that affect the transmission of messages – noise, fields of experience and response. The response makes it an iterative model where sender can alter communication based on the feedback.

Certain scenarios may exist where communication is facilitated by way of various directives to achieve certain outputs. Here, the role of feedback is dominant. Ideally, the barriers of noise ought to be overcome and the message should make its way into the receiver's field of experience, avoiding ambiguity.

To facilitate this, how an individual reacts to a certain set of messages ought to be anticipated. The most direct way to do this is to gauge feedback. This paper attempts to assimilate, and delve into the intricacies of the role perceptions play, and examine how a feedback can be put through the membrane of relevance to ensure successful communication. This is done keeping in mind the ambiguity it can avoid; especially in the sphere of workplace communication, where the meeting of minds is often the backbone of potential productivity.

KEYWORDS: *Feedback in Communication, Effective Communication, Negative Feedback, Noise in Communication & Relevance of Communication*

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INTRODUCTION

Communication - The Two-Way Street

Bernard L Elvin (2002) in his article, *Overcoming Barriers to Communication* expounds on the vitality of feedback in communication. Due to the process of feedback, the sender becomes a receiver and the receiver becomes a sender once the message has been sent. The Shannon-Weaver model of communication does an inversion. By means of feedback, the sender determines whether the message sent has been received in the predetermined form. Feedback involves choice of channel by the receiver of the original message which might be different from the original channel chosen by the sender. For example, an associate in a small firm may choose to reply to his boss' email, in person if he feels he can explain himself better. Hence, the message sent from the boss will need to be carved out in a way that the response it, begets can be tested, regardless of the means of feedback the receiver chooses. Feedback is the mirror of communication. In the most ideal situation, it is a reflection of the message's content and the manner in which it was delivered.

In the absence of any structured or unstructured feedback mechanism, communication remains one-way. Feedback might not always be overt, such as repetition of the message as perceived by the receiver, but at times it might be more subtle, such as in the form of a puzzled look or even a curt nod, both of which are mostly

unstructured and definitely non-verbal means of relaying feedback. Here, we would like to emphasize that both the sender and receiver can play an active role in the process of feedback to make it a more two way process. This is because feedback is not intended to be hurtful, rather helpful; despite the connotations it could bear in certain contexts and all this can be achieved in a bilateral context and environment rather than a unilateral one. Along with the feedback mechanism, the 'timeliness-quotient' of the feedback should also be absolute as prompt and specific feedback is more effective, and makes for a lot of potential Return on Investment (ROI) than a feedback received at its own pace. Additionally, feedback needs to be approached more as a problem in perception of the receiver and not just a discovery of isolated facts. This shall enable the sender to better aid future communication.

RELEVANCE – THE MANDATORY PULSE

Once a basic understanding of how a communication channel works is understood to be a two way process where the coder and the decoder switch depending on who is on the sending and on the receiving end; the relevance of the nature of responses pose as the next pertinent question.

John D. Crumboltz (1964) in his article, *The Nature and Importance of Required Response in Programmed Instruction* elucidates on the significance of relevant response. The objective of his study was to examine the extent to which the requirement and content of a response affects the learning and retention of course material in a classroom scenario. Trivial responses tend to get lower criterion test scores of the students as compared to more critical responses. This leads us to extrapolate that the quality of education received can be assessed by the quality of responses received from the audience, thereby creating a direct and a possible proportional relation between them.

Holland (1960)¹ too established that the content of the response makes a difference to the overall impact of any communication. It is a common misconception that trivial or unnecessary responses are necessary for reinforcing students. However, such responses indicate a lack of attention being paid to more crucial and subtle factors like general needs (e.g. The need for an air-conditioner during peak summer time in a classroom) and general distracting factors (e.g. A squeaky ceiling fan) which can also be categorized as external factors having an explicit impact on the outcomes. In that example as context, it must be understood that the feedback serves as a universal blanket over any successful communication. Also, it is quite necessary for the responses bear relevance for the exercise to be fruitful. The subjectivity, surrounding the answer to which responses will be relevant in which communication channels, will subsist but the communicator must have a clear understanding regarding any such responses before conveying a certain idea. In this way the sender of any communication shall be able to avoid obscurity and irrelevance in any communiqué that (s) he decides to undertake.

QUALITY – THE HARBINGER OF GOOD NEWS

Another facet of subjectivity that will exist after the relevant form of response is received, is the quality of the response. In the acquired response, there will still exist an essence of more and less relevant. The relevance that the communicator seeks to achieve depends on her/his own requirements and standards. Additionally, the exercise of evaluating the responses for their quality is not an objective exercise. An element of subjectivity will always subsist. The exercise is to diminish the subjectivity to the best achievable extent.

B. Benjamin (1955), in his article *The Quality of Response in Census Taking*, highlights the importance of

¹ Holland, James G. "Design and Use of a Teaching Machine Program." Paper presented at American Psychological Association, September 1960. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University. p. 9 (Mimeo)

framing the questions correctly in order to get the desired response. Not only does the fact that whether a question is suitable for inclusion has to be taken into consideration, but also whether it will garner the same reaction from a public that has been presumed while drafting the question. The ‘reproducibility’ factor is given due significance. Answers tend to be unreliable when the public is predisposed to the attitudes of suspicion, resentment, and concealment or is unable to comprehend official concepts. Except for the purposes of ice breaking, certain irrelevant redundancies must also be avoided because the answers to those questions can be rehearsed or could be a simple force of habit. However, some of these redundancies may also be relevant and might even go to the extent of rendering a communicated message empty of its substance if avoided. For instance, a simple “Hello”, or “How have you been?” might attribute its redundancy to a lack of purpose. But if avoided, the message could come across as too direct and invoke a certain hostility in the receiver.

To minimize unreliable answers that the general audience is expected to be well acquainted with, such terms and ideas should be used, while conforming to international definitions and classifications to aid comparability. Some degree of compromise must be accepted and failure to some extent to achieve ideal standards of precision must be pre-specified. The sender must know their audience who shall be receiving the respective communication and should curtail the messages sent to best fit the acumen of the audience in order to possibly acquire a suitably high quality response.

Knowing the audience isn’t only restricted to the semantic technicalities of the messages sent but also considers and is affected by various external factors, such as the social background of the receiver. **Eliot Fredson (1953)** in his article, *The Relation of the Social Situation of Contact to the Media in Mass Communication*, demonstrates that relating the demographic characteristics of an audience to the communication’s content does not adequately explain the response of the audience and also suggests the importance of considering the social life of the audience. The social situation significantly contributes to the understanding and control of the response of the audience towards the media content. This social situation elaborates itself in the context of ‘fields of experience’. All communications occur within the fields of experience that the sender and receiver have been exposed to, in the past or as is created by an ongoing communication. Such experiences tend to have an impact on the sender when she is creating the content to be transmitted through the channel. The respective field of experience has an impact on the receiver receiving the information and decoding it with an omnipresent field of experience, within which the information shall be processed. The fields of experience for the germ on the basis of which perception is formed in the minds of the receivers (audience). In many cases this field of experience can be solely responsible for creating a negative bias in the minds of the audience for any future communication that shall be delivered by the speaker, not just to this audience, but also audiences where the previous audience serves as a reference group or an opinion leader

MASS COMMUNICATION – THE MASS APPEAL

Mass communication is a social process which is heavily dependent on social beings for producing its content, creating and maintaining its media and its audience. The social situation of the audience can operate to distract attention from the content itself, thereby reducing learning responses and lowering emotional responses, and that it can as well act to stimulate unusually great attention to the content itself, thereby increasing learning and emotional responses.

The mere study of the relation of content to the demographic attributes of an audience-I. e., age, sex, education, socioeconomic status-does not adequately address the problem of explaining why the audience reacts as it does. Further, refinement of knowledge may lie in studying the responses of the audience in terms of the organized social life in which it participates, in, the act of attending to mass communications is an integrated part of that organized social life.

It must also be noted that such subtle nuances will become more intricate and consequently, will have to be weighed and balanced based on various factors once different individuals are on the receiving end of the messages delivered. Instances could include instances, such as - bowing as opposed to shaking hands with the Japanese, and the preference of being addressed by the first name in the United States as opposed to the last.

NEGATIVE FEEDBACK – THE OTHER POLE OF AXIS

Feedback will not necessarily always be positive; negative feedbacks will also come with their own set of aspects. Delivering negative feedback at a workplace is a critical exercise, but at the same time a necessary one as it can impact the deliverables of the employee directly and open out the scope for a lot of misunderstanding and miscommunication to seep through.

Weiquan Wang, w., Yi Zhao, z., Lingyun Qiu, q., & Yan Zhu, z. (2014) bring to light, how, in the current set-up of digital reliance, it is fundamental for any communicator to convey information for the receiver to construe in the way that she interprets and the digital realm (as elucidated by the Shannon-Weaver model). Although often inconvenient (especially to the sender), it opens out a realm of information that is misconstrued and could otherwise be countered by subtle human-to-human soft skills. This relevance can be understood by the simple usage of emoticons in virtual communication; using the feedback process model in all forms and types of communications and the reduction of dissonance theory for two types of emoticons expressing likes and disliking. Being contingent on the feedback specificity, the results of the experiment proved that negative feedbacks are indeed perceived differently with either set of emoticons.

Certain primary studies also have been delved into to substantiate more situation-specific conclusions regarding the current line of study. **Richardson, J. C., Besser, E., Koehler, A., Lim, J., & Strait, M. (2016)**, in their primary research regarding the significance of the presence of an instructor in an online platform, and the impact instructors themselves believe to have on the learners because of their instructional presence; elucidates a very basic form of curtailing responses of receivers to better analyze and gauge their own abilities to deliver. This comprised of a study that was conducted regarding the perspectives of instructors teaching in an online post-graduate program at a large university. Though their reasons seemed to vary, the results completely centralized on them viewing instructor presence as directly impacting positive student feedback. Most of the people interviewed accredited the reason for this to bare human nature, the need for a connect to be able to rely on an instructor as an expert. Others felt the inherent need to adapt to the online scenario differently than one of a physical classroom. In summation, what this research primarily highlights are that feedback from the students, both in verbal and nonverbal forms, in essence, aided the instructors in fine-tuning their contribution to the online classrooms and gauging the impact factor.

Another instance is of **Edafe, O., Brooks, W. S., Laskar, S. N., Benjamin, M. W., & Chan, P. (2016)** conducting a study with the endeavor to understand the perceived impact of a teaching method based on the FAIR (Feedback, Activity, Individuality, and Relevance) on students' learning on placement in the clinical context. The sample was asked to write essays, reflecting upon how the fairest approach differs from other methods used, citing its advantages and disadvantages. These essays were then thematically analyzed and rated. This study resulted in 90% of the essays with positive opinions of the usage of the fairest approach. The paper, primarily, has used this primary research to reiterate how the use of feedback at the start, and analyzing them for relevance at the end is a more effective way of teaching and broadly about indulging in effective communication.

Greville-Harris, M., Hempel, R., Karl, A., Dieppe, P., & Lynch, T. R. (2016) in their study delve into the types of feedback a sender might receive and compartmentalize it to two broad categories, validation - where the receiver communicates her understanding of what's being said in the way the sender wishes for it to be; and invalidation - where the sender receives non-understanding feedback. This study primarily magnifies upon whether it is the lack of invalidation, the pertinent presence of validation or the lack of it that serves to be more beneficial to the sender of the message/receiver of the feedback. 90 volunteers were made to receive validating feedback, invalidating feedback or no feedback at all in the course of high stress tasks; psychological tools were used to analyze this and it was found that there was barely any difference between the validated and the control participants but the ones that received invalidated responses showed clear 'reduced social engagement behaviors'. This was used to illustrate how blatantly responses are even sub-consciously assessed by an individual depending on the environment and fields of experience they bear and how that assessment impacts their physical and social behavior.

COGS IN THE WHEEL

We can now examine the various nuances of a communication channel and how responses are gauged. The endeavor of the current study is to string together the pre-established thoughts about successfully conveying messages to achieve feedback that would be beneficial.

Feedback – The Significant Other

The vitality of feedback during communication is emphasized, where the otherwise linear line of communication inverts laterally and the sender becomes a receiver and vice-versa. Gauging the response of the individual delivering the feedback, the sender can determine if the sent message has been received in the intended form. With the aid of this, future communication can be fine-tuned and the perception quotient of the initial receiver recorded. It was verified that the content of the response too makes a difference to the perceived credibility of the message sent. This is because different kinds of receivers would be accepted (at different rates) towards different kinds of messages. This subjectivity must be acknowledged and worked around.

Framing Questions – Skeleton of the Body

Pertinence of framing questions correctly in order to get the desired responses is another key requisite for an effective communication. It is to be noted here that this 'correctness' is merely perceptive and depends on the field of experience of the receiver. This can be established and understood in light of previously garnered responses from the public. It ensures that some connect is always established between the communication and the reason behind indulging in it. The context can then be leveraged for finer, more subtle aspects of the communication. For instance, greeting someone with a *Namaste* would be considered respectful when an individual of Indian origin is addressed, but it would seem quite absurd to one who is detached from the understanding of eastern gestures of courtesy. The importance of considering the social life of the audience is emphasized greatly. It would be considered wise, and sometimes even necessary, to do a background check on the individual(s) addressed to cater to these subtleties better.

Noise – The Remnant Piece in Jigsaw

Other than the positive aspects of communication delivery, the array of pieces reviewed above also include the minimization of what could cause a negative effect of the intended communication; also known as noise. Noise, in communications, can be minimized, but almost never can be entirely eliminated. Hence the communicator should avoid

any miscommunication by crafting the message to orchestrate an anticipated outcome. The accuracy of this anticipated outcome would undoubtedly be subjective, but would prod the communicator to a direction that isn't alien. The use of modern tools like social networking, *emojis* etc., too, can be used in a communicator's favor, especially when the message being sent is a negative in its nature and requires a soothing pre-adapted zone of comfort from the perspective of the receiver. In certain scenarios such as a workplace or a classroom, it is primal to note that those zones of comfort don't mar the formality of the equation shared by the sender and the receiver.

Environment – The Direct Influencer

Often, the environment in which the communication takes place is of utmost importance due to its impact on the overall understanding of the content of the receiver. For example, in a workplace, the casual parlance that is used in a basketball court cannot be used. The point to observe here is that although in both the circumstances, the communicators are working in a team set-up, it's the environment in which they are operating respectively, is what's making the entire difference in the manner of their communication. Each environment has its own set of rules, regulations, norms and culture, and for any successful communicator to be conveying a message; all this must be taken into consideration. In e-mails, there is a certain format and procedure that is to be followed if the communications happens in a professional capacity. This aspect could, however, become subtler of an exercise if more micro norms of an environment are to be taken into consideration. Some companies or workplaces, for example, tend to chalk out their own workplace culture so that the employees work as per the thought processes of the company. In such situations, the thumb-rule of the industry ought to be followed.

Significance of instructor presence has a direct impact to student feedback. This has been mentioned in the context of modern day education systems, which rely on platforms that do not have an instructor, physically present to address the learners – like MOOCs, E-Classrooms and other virtual learning platforms. The establishment of the fact that physical presence aided instructors in fine-tuning their impact factor highlights how communication ought not to be understood as a one-size-fits-all technique but fine-tunes to the organic comprehension abilities of any given audience.

Communication tools like the fairest method which is used to gauge the perceived impact on students' learning is found to accentuate the importance of feedback in any given communication channel and to magnify the pre-dominance feedback already bears on most practices of response evaluation. Another primary research exercise also points out the clear reduction of social engagement behaviors when people aren't given the platform to voice their feedbacks to a delivered message. It detaches them from the communication channel and their responses become generic at worst or nonchalant at best. Generic responses prove to be an obstacle to the communicator's intention to anticipate future communication. This could skew the generalizations made from the findings; while, nonchalant responses could lack accuracy and credibility and could point to no definitive trait of the receiver.

Bias – The Omnipresent Variable

Though the current study contains reviews of works that emphasize on the use of accurate information; the need to rely on accurate data is also to be brought to focus. This usually includes research and generalizations that aren't *completely* sacrosanct because communications is an ever-developing, boundless process.

The usage of a grading system, emoticons, and informal gatherings can be used as tools to subtly convey the correct messages in the right premises and contexts. Prejudices and notions ought to be abated by way of mechanisms to

evaluate the received feedback for relevance and matching it with what the underlying anticipations were. The whole process of valuing feedback often induces positive effects in the frame of reference of the receiver as the perception about their view being taken into consideration seeps through and facilitates positive social engagement behavior.

Mechanisms to recede the dominance of pre-conceived notions ought to be adopted and grading systems to weigh the relevance of feedback could be used to prepare revamped modules to be included in training and development programs of workplaces, workshops in schools, and even meetings and gatherings in social scenarios. Previously existing research and studies, when strung together, fail to lay ample emphasis on the means that need to be employed to curtail future communication on the basis of a pre-delivered feedback.

In summation, the primal factor of consideration that is brought forth is the foundational fact that the communication channel being looked at as unidirectional is the shortcoming of most studies. Whilst analyzing feedback, it is necessary to look at the delivery-feedback routine as a cyclic to and fro process. Communications aren't always as objective as portrayed by the model proposed by Shannon and Weaver, though that could be looked at as the root of it. There is a continuous to and fro delivery of messages and the sender that wishes to dissect the given feedback ought to filter out what could ideally prove to be relevant feedback from the communication.

The accuracy of the data that can be relied upon for the above assertions is also another point of great subjectivity. This is because the very nature of environments, noise, morality, candidness and other factors the subject to the understanding of the receiver. A good communicator should be able to convey these points accurately by keeping within the above boundaries of what is agreeable to the receiver, in order to obtain productive feedback that could be of future use.

Notions and biases must be minimized in the communication channel, or sufficiently concealed, so as to not diminish the impact or value of the message that is to be delivered. The usage of the acquired feedback to streamline future communications is also of great emphasis. Both objective mechanisms and subject-centric mechanisms are to be employed to do this successfully and ensure optimal accuracy of future messages.

Relevance – The Germane Ingredient

The relevance factor is also another key element in the assimilation of feedback. The desired outcome of the communication and what the sender seeks to achieve is to always be kept in mind. What is relevant will be subjective to the scenario at hand and the nature of the communication, among various other factors. For instance, if a company seeks to take steps for a retrenchment and needs to let some of its employees go, the motive of the communication would be to convey the same to the employee subtly; and the relevant feedback would be if the employee understood what the employer was attempting to convey, *in the same spirit*.

The Last Word

The need for feedback is simple - it is for the sender to be able to comprehend whether the message that has been sent is received in the same sense. It ensures that any future communication is accurate and helps the sender curtail the message to best fit the receiver's understanding.

For feedback to even come into consideration, the communication must first ensue. The sender ought to ensure that the essence of the message she wishes to communicate does not get lost in translation. It is to be noted here that

communication needn't only be verbal, something as subtle as a handshake or a beam is, *in essence*, a form of communication. Subtle signs like this may be used to determine various *below-the-surface* points of the communicator's disposition like interest, firmness, confidence, hostility, etc.

With the colloquial method of linear communication from a sender to the receiver as context, the concept of response or feedback can be understood as output that the (previous) receiver is provided to the (previous) sender. Although this process goes to and fro in day-to-day communication, the ability of each message to skew the perceptions and understanding of the receiver is of utmost pertinence. It becomes ominous that drawing a chain of the various conceptual nuances of communication and connecting the loose links will create a clearer picture about feedback in everyday communication.

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